DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 211 688 CE 030 919

AUTHOR Samuels, Frank
TITLE Creating an Effective Learning Environment for Disadvantaged Adult Students.
PUB DATE [81]
NOTE 16p.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adult Basic Education; Adult Education; *Adult Learning; Adult Programs; *Adult Students; Classroom Communication; *Classroom Environment; *Classroom Techniques; Cultural Awareness; *Disadvantaged; Economically Disadvantaged; Educationally Disadvantaged; Minority Groups; Sociocultural Patterns; Student Attitudes; Teacher Attitudes

ABSTRACT

Attention to the quality of the learning environment (both the physical and human dimensions) is critical to positive outcomes for adult disadvantaged learners in basic education. It is necessary to understand the characteristics of the adult disadvantaged student, his/her social and cultural or ethnic background, and how these factors influence his/her classroom behavior and learning ability. If extraneous problems such as unemployment, lack of child care, medical needs, and so on divert the adult learner from the classroom, the teacher should try to help the student to gain access to the community resources available to solve them. It is crucial to the success of the adult learning program that the classroom situation promote the individual's self-worth and healthy self-concept, rather than diminish it. Another factor crucial to effective teaching of adult students is that the subect matter be relevant to their concerns, and not the same as that taught to elementary students. Similarly, adult students must be treated as adults with adult status and not relegated to submissive roles. The classrooom situation as far as possible should be a "we" situation, with students participating in setting objectives and classroom management. Opportunities for support or discussion groups are often helpful, as is the process of individualizing instruction. Finally, reinforcing a sense of community in the classroom should help to enhance the learning environment and the learning process for adult disadvantaged students. Awareness of these suggestions may enable the teacher of the adult disadvantaged to facilitate students' learning experience. (KC)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED211688

CREATING AN EFFECTIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT FOR DISADVANTAGED ADULT STUDENTS

BY

FRANK SAMUELS

CE030919

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Frank Samuels

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CREATING AN EFFECTIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT FOR DISADVANTAGED ADULT STUDENTS

BY FRANK SAMUELS

INTRODUCTION

The current literature evidences a variety of approaches to the organization of an effective learning environment for the disadvantaged adult learner. These approaches are characterized by an emphasis on teaching strategies and the design of curricula and materials. Unfortunately, the social-psychological organization of the learning environment has not been addressed with the same precision. This failure can be traced to the preoccupation of adult educators with the distinguishing features of the adult disadvantaged, rather than the manner in which these features become relevant in some defined educational context and the implication of these for instruction and classroom management. It is axiomatic in adult education that attention must be given to the quality of the learning environment. Usually this refers to both the physical and human dimensions in the environment. Failure to attend to the demands of this critical area can have a crippling effect on the most carefully designed instructional approach and reduce appreciably the positive outcomes of the educational process.

The importance of social-psychological factors in the learning environment becomes clear if we proceed from the assumption that the classrooms is, in reality, a functioning social system comprised of actors, statutes, roles, a value system and common assumptions. The characteristics of the students, as well as the complex of interactions

which constitute this social system, are equally important in determining the quality and extent of the learning which occurs. All groups do not necessarily make good learning environments, although most have the potential. In some instances, despite efforts on the part of the teacher and students, the peculiar chemistry of the class does not yield the desired results. It is clear, however, that the flavor and ambience of the classroom and the attitudes of teachers have a pervasive effect upon the quality of instruction.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE ADULT DISADVANTAGED STUDENT

The disadvantaged student, regardless of his previous school experience, remains a stranger to the academic environment. A large segment of this population is unprepared in terms of attitudes, motivation or rudimentary academic skills. Some are new immigrants. Others are second and third generation, but their behavior and linguistic styles are still rooted in their ethnic neighborhoods, leaving unresolved the incongruity between the home and school environments. Some students are making the acquaintance of the school for the first time, while others come burdened by 12 years of unsatisfactory academic experiences. Each student represents a unique complex of experiences, competencies, attitudes and motivations. However, what these adult students may have in common is a new-found faith in the efficacy of education and the possibility that it may transform the condition of their lives.

Educational disadvantagement is clearly allied to economic disadvantagement. Because of a paucity of economic resources, the student often comes to the classroom plagued by a multiplicity of

stresses. In addition to this, a sense of powerlessness is engendered in the individual because of his inability to engage in the proper management of his environment. This powerlessness translates into a failure orientation which restricts individual initiative and further reduces motivation.

Although the anxieties produced by poverty are difficult to negotiate in a formal learning environment, these stresses must be adequately alleviated before the student can properly attend to the details of the educational process. Each stress condition, depending on its saliency, becomes a reason for the student not to attend class and creates problems of attrition which are independent of teaching strategies or the interactive processes within the classroom. In this context, the teacher should have a knowledge of the institution's resources, which could responsibly address these problems. In addition, the teacher should also attempt to construct personal inter-agency linkages which would facilitate easy referrals and bring community resources to bear on the myriad problems which afflict the disadvantaged. The execution of this function might appear to be outside the normal role requirements of the teacher, but professional discipline involves behavior differentiation; and in helping students to cope with deprivations which affect their conditions and opportunities, the teacher enhances the probability of the students surviving the institution. Some teachers defend against the occupational risk of an advocacy position by hiding behind a professional bureaucrat's <u>personna</u>, but the successful teacher cannot focus on a narrow formalism and remain indifferent to the plight of his students. Provisions should be made for the students to test their own resources, while the teacher remains

available for constructive help. The teacher should strive to maintain a posture of affective neutrality, so as not to deprive the students of the opportunity and responsibility to solve problems which are the natural outcomes of their own behavior and aspirations. Students should be aided in developing a creative engagement with the possibilities within their situation.

The problems and concerns which the adult student brings to the classroom provide a basis for the structure of instructional content. The set of exercises which are designed to teach the basic academic skills, such as reading, English and math, should be structured around recognizable issues and personal needs of the students, so that they enhance the survival potential of the student. At the same time, the curriculum should be geared to offer the widest possible option to enrollees. This means that an affiliative relationship should exist between the basic education curriculum and those in other advanced programs within the institution. This is in keeping with the vision of an educational career line in which the basic education program provides an entering wedge to other academic, vocational and technical areas.[1] Relating content to the needs and concerns of the students yields a student-centered and problem-centered curriculum which integrates well with the attitudes and world view of the adult disadvantaged. Such an approach also creates a community of shared interests, which facilitates the development of personal and social efficacy.

---

[1]Frank Samuels, "ABE Urban Extension: Towards a Strategy of Intervention", Adult Leadership, Vol. 24, No. 2, October, 1975, p. 69.

ADULTS AND CHILDREN: THE CRITICAL DIFFERENCES

Since adults differ significantly from children in terms of self concept, learning motivation, time perspective and the volume and richness of life experiences, it is commonplace in adult education that the approach to children should be differentiated from the approach to adults. However, this ideal is not always realized in the educational treatment of the adult disadvantaged. This is partly due to the fact that the levels of instruction in the disadvantaged classroom argues similarity with that of the public school; nevertheless, these learning milieus are fundamentally different realities which allow sharp distinctions to be made in terms of governance, normative expectations and teaching styles.

In public educational settings, the good students are those who affirm the moral order of the school along such dimensions as cleanliness, emotional control, respect for authority, conformance to discipline and a serious commitment to classroom procedures and routines. For the adult disadvantaged student, the relevant behavior categories should be subject mastery and academic competence consistent with course and program objectives.

In adult disadvantaged classrooms, where affective failures are more numerous than cognitive failures, teaching is an art in human relations. One of the tenets of adult education is that adults will resist learning under conditions which are inconsistent with their image of self. In this vein, problems of self-worth and self-esteem are exacerbated for the disadvantaged through the use of instructional strategies and classroom arrangements which seek to confirm them in

an adolescent status. Such practices proceed from the assumption that failure in the area of academic competence is presumptive evidence of failure in other areas of life. However, in contrast to the child, the disadvantaged adult comes to the classroom with a rich experiential background, a full wardrobe of social identities and references figures as well as successes in other areas of social functioning. The challenge to the teacher is to locate the content areas within this experiential context and to fashion culturally sensitive adragogical techniques which will responsibly address their educational needs. This approach realizes three positive outcomes: it provides him with a personal point of reference, it validates the student's experience as something of value and it confirms his moral worth.

Similarly, the more penal and repressive forms of governance which characterize many public school classrooms[2] prove counterproductive in assembling a viable working relationship with disadvantaged adults. Although the structure of schools certifies power differentials between teacher and students, adult students should be allowed full entrance into the decision-making process within the classroom. This takes cognizance of the fact that both student and teacher share adult status and on this basis can engage in a creative partnership of problems solving. This recognition makes possible a truly collaborative approach to learning. This does not deny the importance of structure in the instruction of the adult disadvantaged. There should

---

[2]Martin Carnoy, "Unequal Education and the Social Division of Labor", Schooling in a Corporate Society, Martin Carnoy (Ed.), (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1972), p. 50.

be a balance between "process" and substantive outcome. The students' presence in a remedial classroom may be due to the fact that they were allowed (even by well-meaning teachers) to trivilize the primary and secondary school years. Consequently, the teacher must make legitimate demands upon them to guard against the repetition of their earlier failures.

Students should be encouraged to become active participants in the teaching/learning process, with some degree of mutual involvement in the determination of objectives. Many of these adults have developed elaborate coping routines to mask their cognitive and linguistic deficiencies. Many students fear that their questions will disclose their ignorance or indicate dissatisfaction and assume that an obligation of compliance is necessary if they wish to maintain an amicable relationship with the teacher. Such silence might reinforce the impression on the part of the teacher that the student is ineducable, hostile or unmotivated. Furthermore, the learning environment presents a stressful situation to the disadvantaged adult; consequently, there is a felt need to provide moral and psychological support for the individual. This can be provided through the medium of learning networks or discussion groups in which the student is privy to both the teacher and learner roles. This form of peer-mediated instruction is one of the most effective teaching strategies within the adult disadvantaged classroom. Self-directed inquiry also provides them with a personal stake in the outcomes of instruction.

INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES: IMPLICATION FOR INSTRUCTION

The learning environment should be organized around the concept of individual differences, with differences providing clues as to how the student is prepared to learn. Learning is then viewed appropriately as a constant, with time, teaching methods and materials viewed as variables. The teacher should seek, through curriculum content, physical setting and teaching strategy, to achieve a closer fit between learning potential and the demands of the various learning tasks and educational objectives. No single approach to instruction can successfully confront the richness and diversity of learning styles which is represented in the normal basic education classroom. The teacher must be andragogically flexible in an approach which is student centered and not procedural or method centered. Within this context, testing becomes a diagnostic process, generating statements which specify the conditions under which the individual learns. When one considers the differential vulnerability of the educationally disadvantaged to adverse classification, it is critical that this exercise be kept to a minimum. Testing is anxiety producing and the means by which many of those students have been certified as failures in their earlier school experiences. It should be no mystery why many students exhibit an almost phobic response to this event. Therefore, in the process of individualizing the learner, the teacher should be aware of the individual's sense of his own competencies, as well as the anxiety and uncertainty he brings to the learning situation and the implications of these for the accomplishment of instructional objectives.

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES: IMPLICATIONS FOR INSTRUCTION

The disadvantaged adult evidences an uncommon sensitivity which can be partially attributed to the minority experience which is shared by a significant segment of this population. This sensitivity is an integral element in their cognitive defense against the pain of anxiety and rejection as they confront difficult economic environments and a sometimes hostile society. The culture associated with this population is derogated because they are impoverished and powerless.[3] This labeling process has certain negative cognitive consequences. Therefore, an awareness of the social and cultural heritage of the students is an indispensable attribute for teaching the adult disadvantaged. Whether out of professional duty or ideology, the teacher must display an unbiased attitude and strongly convey to the students his belief in their ability to learn. Students should not be penalized for being culturally different; indeed, the classroom should be enriched by their cultural diversity.[4] However, the minority experience is not a valid reason to exempt these students from the requirement of reflecting in their daily actions the duties and responsbilities which the institution demands of all its students.

Personal and professional integrity is central to this context. In the search for relevance and relatedness, the teacher is often

---

Murray L. Wax and Rosalie H. Wax, "Cultural Deprivation as an Educational Ideology: in The Culture of Poverty: A Critique", Eleanor Leacock (Ed.), (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1971), p. 138

4. Mind P. Shaughnessy, Errors and Expectations, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 9.

tempted to adopt the lifestyle of the student in terms of vocabulary and dress. Such attempts are fraudulent and place the credibility of the teacher at serious risk. Students are alive to the incongruities between the idioms of the street, the stylized mannerisms and forms of dress which characterize the disadvantaged subculture and the formal and informal role requirements of the teacher. Some students are often offended by this pretense and react accordingly, while others will censure such behavior with ridicule. In either event, the teacher's legitimacy is eroded and his effectiveness is compromised. The important requirement for teachers of the disadvantaged is to be able to perceive the demands of other social and cultural systems, often antithetical to their own and to structure an empathic relationship with the students so that they are better able to discern the values by which the students live and fully appreciate the effectiveness of those values in the lives of those who regard them as real.

DEVELOPING A SENSE OF COMMUNITY

The adult disadvantaged, in addition to material deprivation, are deprived of status and a sense of community. Students should never be addressed as "boys" and "girls" but as men and women. The former implies defaming stereotypes and arouse antagonism and resentment. Students should also be called by their proper names. Anglicized names or names which are easier to pronounce should not be substituted for the real names of students. In a similar vein, the teacher should adopt a single mode of address for participants within the classroom.

Children are normally addressed by their first names; however, if adult students are addressed in this manner, they should be allowed to respond to the teacher in a similar fashion without facing the threat of informal sanctions. Disparities in forms of address is another kind of invidious distinction and has an erosive effect on the self-concept of the adult disadvantaged. Rituals and forms are status-defining activities for those who, in their social encounters with the larger society, are consistently denied the normative expectations of civility and courtesy.

The classroom agenda should always emphasize the communal relationship. In order to foster a sense of community, the teacher, in addressing the class, should attempt to use terms and phrases such as "our class", "let us do this exercise together", "we should attempt this today". Language which suggests alienative distinctions, such as "you people", devolves to the detriment of classroom cohesion. Students should also be made aware that they face common issues which are susceptible to both individual and collective solutions.

A related problem flows from the fact that disadvantaged subcultures are characterized by an active mistrust of authority figures and a generalized refusal to give deference to authority. These attitudes are reactions to their negative experiences with institutions and bureaucracies. Within this subculture, status is not an attribute of one's social position. Status must be earned and flows from the individual's actions and personal characteristics. Consequently, the teacher has to "prove himself" and may well experience the full range of student hostility and defensiveness before his actions are perceived as credible. The teacher must be willing to

take prudent risks in order to construct a trusting relationship and reach out to students even before the students are ready to respond.

In an adult classroom, the management of rule-breaking behavior is always problematical. Criticism might well be the appropriate response to abusive students or practices which fracture the decorum of the classroom. Criticisms, however, should normally be conducted in private, particularly in the case of academic performance because the loss of face before the student's peers is particularly damaging to the student's self-concept, and public criticism might well elicit a similar response on the part of the student, creating an unwanted conflict situation.

The adult disadvantaged student expresses gratitude easily; however, gratitude should not be expected from the students. Teachers should be mindful of the fact that expressions of gratitude may be a coping strategy because the students feel they are captive and these routines are in their best interest. The teacher should attempt to loosen existing bonds of dependency and not try to cement new ones. The students, as citizens of the community, are exercising their rights to educational services--a service for which the teachers are professionally compensated. The proper expectation should be personal respect in the same measure that the teacher is prepared to give it to the students.

CONCLUSION

In the instruction of the adult disadvantaged, the stress should be on a creative interface between the affective and cognitive aspects of instruction. The teacher, as the central actor in the system,

sets the affective tone of the classroom. Therefore, the entirety of pertinent actions and attitudes should conduce to the view that the student is something of value, that his potential is being realized and that the society is prepared to reward the successful consequences of his efforts.

There is no all embracing solution to the complex instructional problems of the educationally disadvantaged. The suggestions mentioned above are obviously not exhaustive. They address themselves to important aspects of successful learning situations. Awareness of and attention to these details may well enable the educationally disadvantaged adult to overcome his initial experiential deficit and become a successful learner and a useful and productive member of society.

REFERENCES

1. Carnoy, Martin, "Unequal Education and the Social Division of Labor", Schooling in a Corporate Society, Martin Carnoy (Ed.), (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1972), pp. 36-69.

2. Samuels, Frank, "ABE Urban Extension: Towards a Strategy of Intervention", Adult Leadership, Vol. 24, No. 2, October, 1975, pp. 68-70.

3. Shaughnessy, Mina P., Errors and Expectations, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

4. Wax, Murray L. and Rosalie H. Wax, "Cultural Deprivation as an Educational Ideology", The Culture of Poverty: A Critique, Eleanor Leacock (Ed.), (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1971), p. 127-139.